

WORKFORCE Solutions

ANNE ARUNDEL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Pruning the Language Barrier Taking Command of the Communication Gap

by Candace Dodson Reed

"Actuar siempre de manera correcta y profesional para ofrecerle a nuestros clientes un servicio de la mejor calidad. Usted es el primer y último representante de Relms en el sitio de trabajo."

This is just one of the phrases that the employees at Relms Landscaping have learned in their Command Spanish® classes held on site at their company in Annapolis. Relms, a commercial and residential landscaping maintenance company, has participated in the courses that teach their managers and supervisors relevant Spanish phrases and words since 2003.

"The value in our managers and supervisors being able to communicate with the Latinos in their native language is priceless. It allows us to solidify our relationship with our Latino workforce and shows that we care about them enough to learn to speak their language," said Ned Brooks, president and chief executive officer of Relms.

"Our business is faith, family and culture based and we believe that if you nurture and treat your employees well, they will blossom, thus making the business blossom. Since we started this relationship, our company has grown financially and our client complaints have decreased because our employees can now communicate with each other," Brooks said.

According to the 2000 Census Report from the United States Census Bureau, about 13 percent, or almost 36 million people in the United States are of Hispanic or Latino origin. These numbers reflect a whopping 4 percent increase from the 1990 Census Report. In Maryland and Washington, D.C. alone, an estimated 233,000 people of Latino origin reside. Brooks, who also serves on the Association of Latino Marylanders of Anne Arundel County, recognizes this trend. "The next great immigrant pool is here," he said. "Companies need to recognize it and embrace it. It is not going away."

This consistent increase in Spanish-speaking people in the country, and specifically in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area, will subsequently affect the workplace as employees who speak two very different languages attempt to communicate with each other. The

Center for Workforce Solutions at AACC has created a solution for this need by partnering with Command Spanish®. In addition to offering programs for county and state employers, AACC has entered into an exclusivity agreement for the Washington, D.C. market.

The Command Spanish® product was developed by a former instructor, Dr. Sam Slick, in 1997, primarily to train employees and supervisors on key phrases and words that are relevant to their occupation and to teach English-speaking employees how to communicate with Spanish-speaking co-workers, clients and patients. With modules - such as Spanish for Nursing, Spanish for Landscaping, Nurseries, Groundskeeping and Golf Courses, Spanish for Banking and Spanish for Firefighters - the product line speaks to the various industries by offering phrases that the employees will need to use to ask for information, provide help or even operate equipment. Though the employees who take the courses will not be fluent enough to have a full-fledged conversation with Spanish-speaking individuals, they will learn proper pronunciation and communication strategies.

"Command Spanish® helps fill a critical need. How could someone in any industry not need this for their company?" Brooks said. "I do not know of any other way that employers in the various industries can help their employees learn how to tell someone in Spanish that they are going to start an IV, ask someone where they live or even tell someone to put a hard hat on."

Brooks takes it a step further with his employees and offers his Spanish-speaking employees English as a Second Language classes through the college as well. He believes that his employees should close the gap by learning English if they are a native Spanish speaker and vice versa.

"One of the best things," said Brooks with a smile, "is that our relatively inexpensive monetary investment has had a huge long-term return in our relationship with our employees. Not only do we have happier, more productive employees, but we also are able to use this training as a recruitment tool."